

International Congress on the Enlightenment
Münster, 23-29 July 1995

Section: Literature and Philosophy
Round Table: D'Alembert and the Encyclopédie

China in the Encyclopédie

J.A.G. Roberts, University of Huddersfield, England

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Jesuit missionaries and Voltaire described the relationship between ruler and subject as one of benevolence and affection, but Montesquieu described China as a despotic state of which the principle was fear. In *LÉGISLATEUR*, Saint-Lambert discussed the duties of the sovereign and the Chinese tradition of benevolent rule and instructing one's subjects in virtue. But he noted that they now relied more on their Tartar soldiers than on the love of their people. He implied that China may have been a model for government in the past, but the Manchu conquest of 1644 had transformed the country into a despotism.

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Diderot marvelled that the Chinese written language had not been simplified and considered Chinese drama to be imperfect. In PEINTURE Jaucourt said Chinese painting imitative and lacking genius. In TOUR DE PORCELAINE Jaucourt made disparaging remarks about the Porcelain Tower outside Nanking. Chinese applied arts better treated. Articles on artificial flowers (FLEURISTE ARTIFICIEL), on Chinese paper (PAPIER DE LA CHINE) and above all on porcelain. Jaucourt and d'Holbach interested in manufacturing porcelain of similar quality in Europe.

Conclusion

The entries show little consistency. In the early volumes Diderot's authorship of CHINOIS, PHILOSOPHIE DES gave some editorial direction and a comprehensive coverage of some topics. But many discrepancies in the romanisation of Chinese terms and disrespectful treatment of things Chinese, e.g. the articles LI and JU. Many comments reinforced current stereotypes relating to China and the Chinese, some contradicted travellers' tales. Some of the admiration for the government and the ethical code remained, but this overshadowed by the sceptical tone adopted by Diderot, d'Holbach and Jaucourt. They used the Chinese examples to criticise Europe, but their interest in technology and progress also led them to disparage China as a country which had achieved notable things in the past, but which was now surpassed by Europe.

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